

Duxbury man cited for work with plovers

By ROBERT DEVANEY
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DUXBURY — The coastal waterbirds of Massachusetts should be the first ones to congratulate Scott Hecker.

The Duxbury resident and director of the Coastal Waterbird Program at the Massachusetts Audubon Society received the Visionary Award from the Gulf of Maine Council on Marine Environment for 1998.

Each year the council honors citizens or organizations who have demonstrated exceptional innovation, creativity and commitment in preserving and protecting the marine environment of the Gulf of Maine.

For nearly 12 years, Hecker has run the Audubon's Coastal Waterbird Program, which protects critical coastal water-bird habitats in Massachusetts.

"I was always interested in observing and drawing birds," he said. "As I got older and went to college, I realized we needed to protect them or they would be in danger of disappearing."

Hecker said that when he joined the program in May 1987 he and two others were the only ones out on the beaches. Twelve years later the program has a full-time director, 12 part-time and seasonal employees, and more than 100 volunteers.

Not only has the number of people in the program increased, but so has the number of the globally threatened piping plover. Their numbers have increased in Massachusetts from 126 nesting pairs in 1987 to 495 pairs in 1998.

Hecker said one of the main reasons for the resurgence is that the plovers' nests have been protected from off-road vehicles in the past few years.

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Scott Hecker,
 Visionary Award winner

Waterbird program officials monitor the birds and their chicks, keep people and vehicles from coming within 200 yards of the nests, and explain to beach users what they are doing.

"It is great, the results I've been able to see in just the past three to five years," Hecker said.

In the past year, the program was extended to the North Shore, expanding the number of nesting sites the Audubon Society monitors to 55. The society monitors these sites to ensure that human activity on the beach, especially off-road vehicle recreation, does not interfere with the nesting patterns of the piping plovers.

The tiny sand-colored bird, which has been on the federal endangered species list since 1986, makes its home along the Atlantic Coast.

Hecker said piping plovers prefer to nest on beaches that are flat and have little vegetation.

Despite the success of the plover in recent years, "We still have a long way to go before they'll be off the endangered species list," Hecker said.

Their population is up to 60 percent of what it will take to get them off the endangered species list, he said.